DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 514 CS 217 475

AUTHOR Tarvers, Josephine Koster; Buswell, Eric
TITLE "The Tutor's Computer Ate My Paper" and Other Notes from a Pilot Study of E-mail Tutoring.
PUB DATE 2000-11-00
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Writing Centers Association (5th, Baltimore, MD, November 2-4, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Electronic Mail; Feasibility Studies; Higher Education; *Tutoring; *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Dialogic Communication; Face to Face Communication; Tutor Role; *Winthrop University SC; *Writing Conferences

ABSTRACT

A study examined the feasibility of e-mail tutoring at Winthrop University, a medium-sized state supported liberal arts university with limited technology access. Initially it looked at the questions of directive versus nondirective methods in tutoring, but it quickly spread to questions of submission, formatting, and strategy. A total of 26 e-mail submissions were received from 5 undergraduates and 4 graduate students; the 26 e-mail essays resulted in 17 e-conferences, 8 face-to-face conferences--and the computer "ate" one student e-mail. The tutor allowed students to submit their essays in three different ways. Many questions have been posed as to whether the e-mail conference is collaborative or authoritative, but an e-mail writing conference can be a dialogue, even if the e-mails seem to be going mostly one way. E-tutoring methods were based on articles by David Coogan and by Barbara Monroe. The tutor covered the client's entire essay in the overview, including higher-order concerns and lower-order concerns. The strategy which evolved tried to encourage collaboration; however, the students responded not by e-mailing back to the tutor, but by revising the essays they submitted to their instructor. According to the instructor, the students who received e-mail tutoring did slightly better than the students who received face-to-face tutoring. The instructor also found that the tutor was able to cover much more in e-mail sessions than could be covered in class sessions. However, interface problems were an issue for the tutor. (Contains a 13-item select bibliography and 4 figures of data.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 451 514

"The Tutor's Computer Ate My Paper" and Other Notes from a Pilot Study of E-mail Tutoring.

by Josephine Koster Tarvers and Eric Buswell

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J K. Tarvers
E. O. Buswell
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 217 475

Josephine Koster Tarvers
Eric Buswell
Winthrop University
National Writing Centers Association, Baltimore, November 2000

"The Tutor's Computer Ate My Paper" and Other Notes from a Pilot Study of E-mail Tutoring

I. The Study. [Eric speaks] Jo Koster Tarvers and I will be presenting the results of an e-mail writing tutoring study conducted during Spring, 2000, at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. I will be discussing implications from a tutor's view and Jo will present from an instructor's and administrator's point of view.

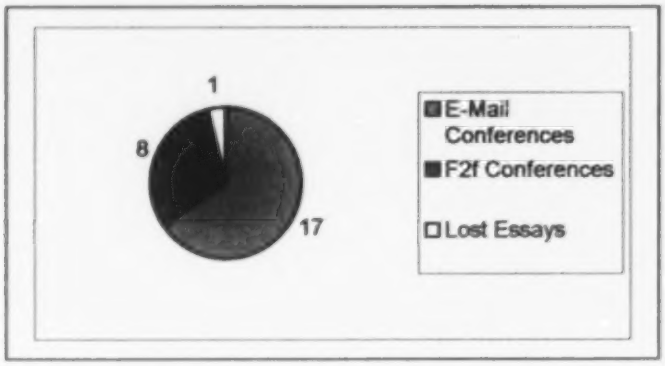
Our study examined the feasibility of e-mail tutoring at our institution, a medium-sized state supported liberal arts university with limited technology access. My initial concern was to look at the questions of directive vs. nondirective methods in tutoring, but quickly spread to questions of submission, formatting, and strategy.

I received a grant total of 26 e-mail submissions from five undergraduate and four graduate study participants (Figure 1). The 26 e-mail essays resulted in 17 e-conferences, 8 face-to-face conferences, and my computer ate one student e-mail. The undergraduates were enrolled in Writing 102, our required second-semester freshman argumentative writing class. Of these undergraduate students, three were in Jo's classes. The graduate students were all enrolled in separate graduate seminar courses. The focus of this presentation will be on my work with the undergraduate students, as it more clearly foregrounds the issues we identified.

Getting students to submit essays and successfully conquering Winthrop's sometimes unreliable technology were major concerns for my study, so I offered three different ways the students could send me their essays. The first was a web-based e-mail drop box (Figure 2) that the

students could access through their web browsers, fill out a simple form, paste their essays into the box provided, and then click "submit" to send me the information.

Figure 1.



The drop box sent me the e-mail as plain text (Figure 3). Included in the form fields were places for students to describe the rhetorical situation and characterize what they perceived as two stronger and two weaker areas of their drafts. This was the easiest method for students to use in submitting essays, but often textual format markers such as paragraph breaks and italicizing were lost when the paper was submitted via plain text. Also, some lines near page numbers disappeared if students were using headers. This caused me as the tutor to have to intuit the missing or altered information.

Figure 2: The web-based drop box interface

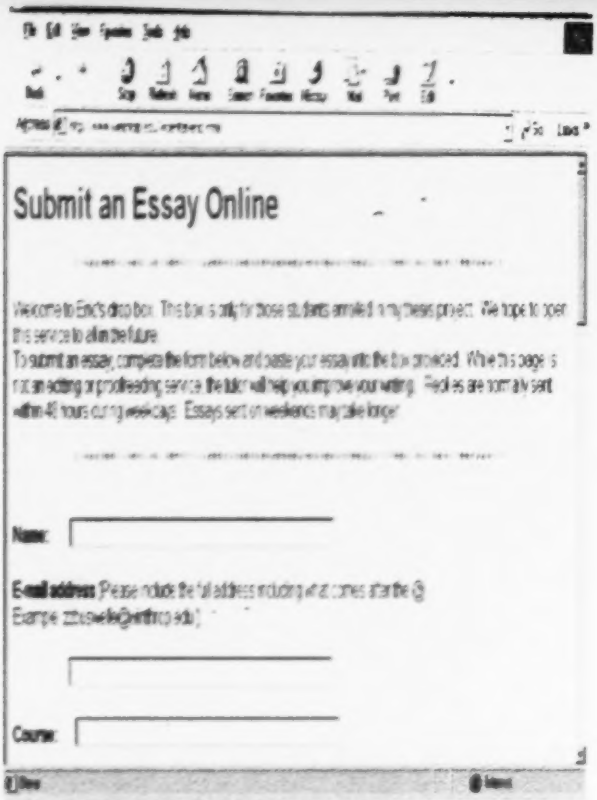
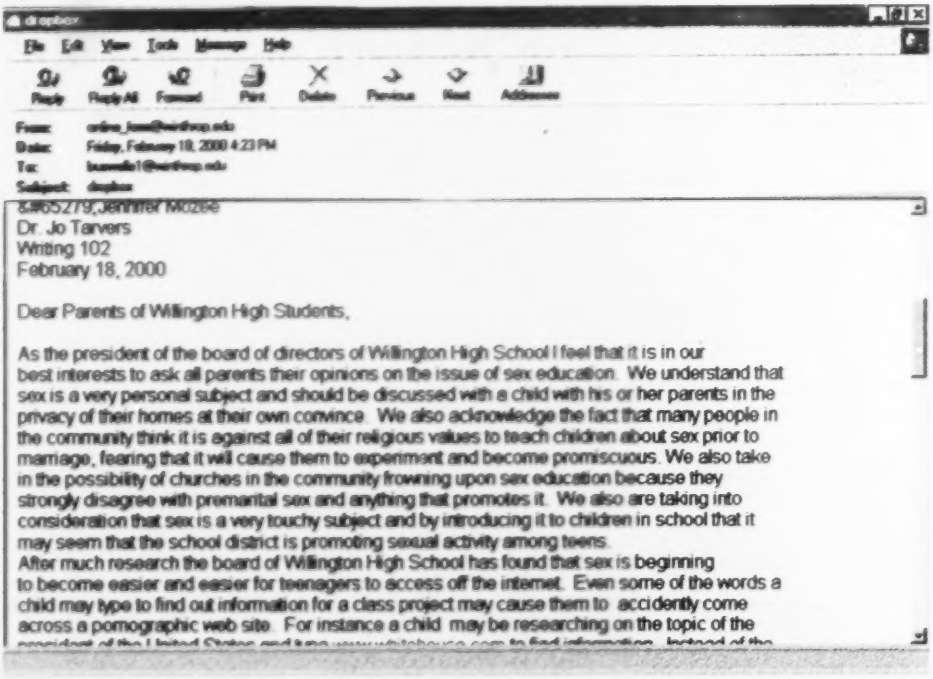


Figure 3: Student submission from the web-based drop box


Reply
Reply All
Forward
Print
Delete
Previous
Next
Addresses
Dr. Jo Tarvers
Writing 102
February 18, 2000
Dear Parents of Willington High Students,
As the president of the board of directors of Willington High School I feel that it is in our best interests to ask all parents their opinions on the issue of sex education. We understand that sex is a very personal subject and should be discussed with a child with his or her parents in the privacy of their homes at their own convince. We also acknowledge the fact that many people in the community think it is against all of their religious values to teach children about sex prior to marriage, fearing that it will cause them to experiment and become promiscuous. We also take in the possibility of churches in the community frowning upon sex education because they strongly disagree with premarital sex and anything that promotes it. We also are taking into consideration that sex is a very touchy subject and by introducing it to children in school that it may seem that the school district is promoting sexual activity among teens.
After much research the board of Willington High School has found that sex is beginning to become easier and easier for teenagers to access off the internet. Even some of the words a child may type to find out information for a class project may cause them to accidently come across a pornographic web site. For instance a child may be researching on the topic of the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

As a submission alternative, I also provided the students with an e-mail form that included instructions on attaching Word files. The e-mail form requested the same information as the web-based drop box. The students were to fill out the information in the body of the e-mail, attach their essays, and send them to me from their e-mail accounts. This method of transmitting essays should have been the easiest for me to work with; however, all the essays I received as attachments were in incompatible file formats: four were Macintosh files and one was an unidentifiable format. I was, however, able to salvage and translate these files.

Finally, I also accepted a few essays pasted into the body of the e-mail. Like the other formats, this also had potential problems. These lost a great deal of formatting information, and students often forgot to provide the contextual information the drop box asked for.

II. The Nature of E-Mail Tutorials [Eric continues]. Many questions have been posed over the effectiveness of e-mail writing conferences; primarily, is the e-mail conference collaborative or authoritative, non-directive or directive? Joanna Caster, in her essay "The Asynchronous Online Writing Session: A Two-Way Stab in the Dark," mentions one such negative aspect:

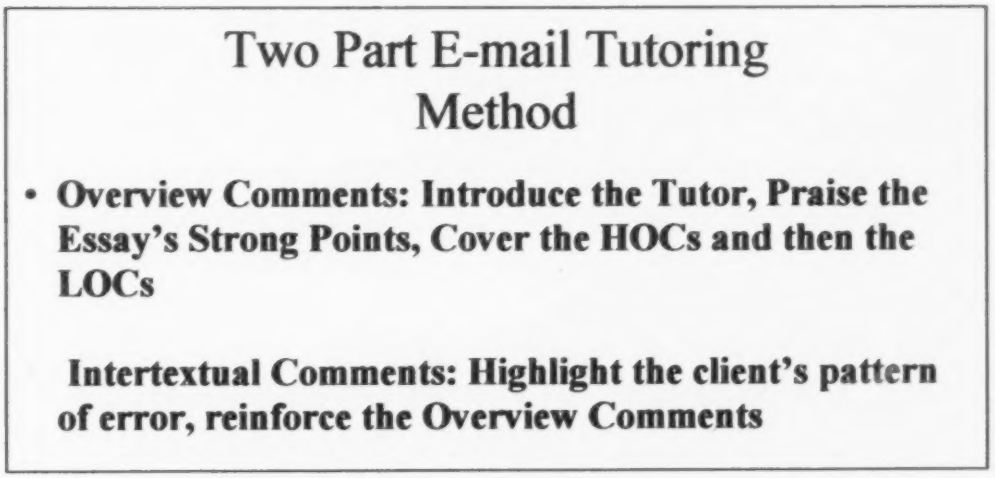
> a lack of dialogue between the consultant and client promotes the wrong idea about the goal of writing centers and the nature of the writing process itself. Consultants do not want clients to perceive writing centers as fix-it shops, places where writing can be repaired in one session. E-mail consulting without dialogue, however, may promote these ideas (120).

But e-mail writing conferences can be a dialogue, even if the e-mails seem to mostly be going one way. The one constant in e-mail tutoring is.....the tutor. The tutor can control how an e-mail

session is perceived by the client through the text of the conference.

In my overview comments on the student essays I received, I based my e-tutoring methods on David Coogan's articles "E-mail Tutoring: A New Way to Do New Work" and "E-mail 'Tutoring' as Collaborative Writing," and Barbara Monroe's article "The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference" (Figure 4). However, I adapted and changed these methods in several ways: I only used overview and intertextual commentary and did not use closing remarks I used a four-step method designed to foster non-directness and active student participation and to help bridge the grey area between physical presence and absence.

Figure 4: Tutoring Pattern for E-tutoring


Two Part E-mail Tutoring Method
• Overview Comments: Introduce the Tutor, Praise the Essay's Strong Points, Cover the HOCs and then the LOCs
Intertextual Comments: Highlight the client's pattern of error, reinforce the Overview Comments

I covered the client's entire essay in the overview, including higher-order concerns and lower-order concerns. In the intertextual comments, I placed my responses directly following a sentence containing an error because it allowed clients to see their error patterns more effectively. I found that the method of separating intertextual remarks from the error by inserting line breaks or asterisks was confusing to both client and tutor because of the "distance" between the error and

the explanation.

For example, instead of saying in my e-mail replies, "Here are your problems and here is how to fix them," I used a pattern to reinforce my non-directiveness and to help the student understand my reply. By using this pattern, I followed the same strategies of questioning that a face-to-face conference often reflects. After I praised the strong points of the essay, I addressed first the higher-order concerns and then the lower-order concerns. These comments began with a non-directive statement followed by a question addressed to the client, and then followed with a an example or an explanation for handling the concern.

Often, I would switch or even change the order of my four components depending on the situation. Below is a typical example of my e-tutoring overview pattern from my reply to Student D:

> You may want to establish who "we" and "I" represent in this paragraph. Are you speaking as a member of the Atlanta school board? A concerned citizen? A teacher? Let your audience know where you stand–you can also do this while you are establishing your "common ground." Examples might be "As a teacher here in Atlanta" or "Because I am a member of your school board..."

I concentrated on using modal verbs in my opening non-directive statements: *could, would be, should, may, consider, think*, and *hope*. By using this terminology, I called the client's attention to a potential problem, much as a face-to-face tutor would do during a physical session. In the above example I used "You may want to" to highlight the higher-order concern of common ground, since the assignment was to write a Rogerian argument. As in a face-to-face conference, the non-directive language also helped me to establish rapport with the student and let the student

know I was reacting as a reader, not operating from a higher position of authority.

Because the e-tutorial takes place through text and not speech, I attempted to pose questions in ways that would allow different options for the clients. After my non-directive opening statement, I posed questions to help the client explore the issue at hand. In the example above, i used several different questions to help Student D shape his essay by deciding how and where he stood within the context of his argument.

I attempted to cover the major issues in the overview comments so that the client would understand what I was explaining, because I had only text to work with, rather the luxury of going back-and-forth in a face-to-face session. My comments were designed to help students reach the same discoveries that they would if they worked with me (or another tutor) face-to-face. In some instances, I found that examples helped me explain the issues I was highlight. In the example given above, I provided both explanation and example when I wrote, "Let your audience know where you stand," and provided two possible examples of how that stance might be conveyed (e.g. "As a teacher here in Atlanta").

In the strategy I evolved, I was trying to encourage collaboration; however, the students responded not by e-mailing me back, but by revising the essays that they submitted to their instructors. So in some senses, no real dialogue took place. The tutor can create the situation for collaboration, but the initiative to respond (and to respond to which audience) rests with the client. Just as in a face-to-face session, sometimes the client does not respond, and the tutor does not know if the student was helped or not. It is really the teacher of the e-tutored student who probably can judge how well e-tutoring works, and Jo will address that point of view now.

III. The Teacher's Perspective [Jo speaks]. I was not only Eric's thesis advisor but a teacher of some of the students who participated in the pilot study, a former director of the Writing Center, and the Department's Technology Co-ordinator. From the point of view of a teacher, I can say that the students who received e-mail tutoring did slightly better than the students who received face-to-face tutoring. Ten of the twenty students in my Argumentation class attended the Writing Center in Spring 2000, notifying me of at least 26 appointments; of those ten, three participated in the e-mail study as well as receiving face-to-face tutoring. One student made an A, five made Bs, and the other four made Cs. The three receiving both e-mail and face-to-face tutoring had an average grade of 83.3 in the class, slightly higher than the seven students who only received face-to-face tutoring, whose average was 81.1. (The overall class average was 81.8, as was the average for all ten students who went to the Center.) However, two of the three students in the e-mail tutoring cadre, and six of the seven in the face-to-face cadre, started the semester with grades of D or lower; all made significant improvements. (Winthrop doesn't give plus or minus grades, but four of the five students of the ten who made Cs were within one point of making a B in the class.)

Some clearer insight comes from looking at the copies of the tutors' reports I received about the sessions these students had at the Center (the students have a choice of whether to report the session back to me, and most seem to do so). As the fate of the schedule would have it, Eric tutored two of the students face-to-face that he also worked with on e-mail. Working on an e-mail draft with student J, Eric's comments are "I pointed out ways to smooth[e] the intros to quotations and block quotes. I offered ways to be more direct in a Rogerian setting. Some in-text examples of word choice, tense shifts, and awkward sentences." The tendency to directive

summation is clear here: Eric is *pointing out, offering, giving.* The student objectives are summed up as "Revise and correct." By contrast, his written report of a face-to-face session about the same paper with student J reads as follows: "We discussed how/where to place a specific thesis. We also looked at making intros smoother and documenting hypertext, and some language use also." The student objectives (which the student and tutor choose collaboratively and write in a special section of the form) are "Revise–make sure you have a thesis that gives your main points. When in doubt, document. Fix minor errors." The discussion of the session here is more dialogic: *We discussed, We looked at.* But the objectives again are directive and summative.

In an e-tutoring session, of course, as you've seen from Eric's examples already, the reply Eric sent to the student was much more discursive. The slip the student carried away from the face-to-face session has more of the "Do this" feel to it; in some respects, the summative comment to the student was less proprietary in e-tutoring than in face-to-face tutoring. Part of this is time, of course; in a 30-minute session, there's little time to read a draft, discuss it, *and* write a polished piece of reflective prose about it. E-tutoring gave Eric an opportunity, apparently much appreciated by the students, to help them make their own decisions.

As a teacher, I noted too how much more Eric was able to cover with these writers in e-tutoring sessions than we normally accomplish in 30-minute f2f sessions. A review of student D's electronic draft of a Rogerian argument on school uniforms, for instance, is described in the tutorial report as "Gave examples of and discussed 'common ground'. Worked to establish who 'I' and 'we' represented. Gave examples of MLA documentation, both in text and in Works Cited. LOCS: Contractions, comma splices, intro phrases–showed him how to find and fix; gave page #s from *Prentice Hall.*" This is far more than a tutor would be able to discuss adequately in a 30-

minute f2f session, so the student actually got *more* tutoring electronically than he would have in a physical visit to the Center, even though he or she has less actual conversation about the paper with the tutor. This difference in tutoring strategies is what Eric has come to call "the grey area," and I'll let him talk here about what that entails.

IV. The Grey Area [Eric speaks]. In my study I found that e-mail conferences are an ambiguous collaborative arena because they fall in between collaboration and non-collaboration. By using non-directive terminology and questions, I tried to call attention to the writer's problems, but in a very indirect, encouraging way, much as tutors do in face-to-face sessions. By being indirect, I engaged the student in thinking without actually writing "You need to fix this." Basically, my questions were "What do you think?" type statements designed to inspire the students to take a more active role in the e-tutorial dialogue. These also gave the student a wide range of options with which to direct and shape the essay. This approach kept me from appropriating or "taking over" the student's essay, an issue in both face-to-face and e-tutoring. Although I often switched the sequence of my four elements around or skipped the examples, my comments tried to give the students an explanation of why an issue needed to be addressed; when the situation was complex, I added examples to add clarity, since I could not read the student's body language or ask the clarifying questions I would use in a face-to-face tutorial. I also used these practices for the comments I inserted within the body of students' texts. In a face-to-face writing conference, a tutor can easily give an explanation or example depending upon the student's expressed comprehension, but in the e-mail conference the tutor must bridge the grey area and provide what the student may need to make the essay stronger. The grey area, of course, comes from the fact

that the student's collaboration is usually only expressed through the revised version of the paper given to a professor; the e-tutor lacks the true feeling of collaboration he or she receives through face-to-face interaction.

My study showed that not only did the e-tutor have to make adjustments, but that administrators of writing centers must adjust their thinking for e-tutoring as well. Jo will now outline some of those adjustments.

V. The Administrator's Perspective [Jo concludes]. As an administrator–formerly Director of the Center and now Coordinator of Technology–I see the work Eric has done as being very valuable and also very vexing. Clearly, in a Center whose physical appointments are at 85% capacity, as ours have been this fall, the option of e-tutoring would benefit many students who cannot get appointment times in the open hours. Of an enrollment that varies from 5800 to 6100 students, Winthrop also has some 12% non-traditional students, and makes a considerable effort to offer courses at night on a regular rotation to allow those students and students working full-time to have access to our courses. The Writing Center has long been concerned with offering appointments to those students, and has extended hours in the evening and on Sundays to do so. E-tutoring would enable us to offer more services to these students.

But we need **more resources** to do so. Currently the Center is so busy that we cannot afford to assign one or more tutors full-time to e-tutoring, or even to provide limited part-time service; the old cry of "show me the money" is heard again in the land. Eric's research has shown that e-tutoring takes more time and effort than f2f tutoring, so centers that want to establish even a limited e-tutoring service will have to budget for the extra expense of e-tutors. Likewise, there is the question of equipment. Luckily, Eric had a good computer and web access at home, since a

lot of these papers were submitted in the wee small hours of the morning; even with a 24-hour turnaround cycle, it's clear that the e-tutor won't always be able to sit at a machine in the physical Center to respond to e-drafts. Right now we only have one networked PC in our Center, though we eventually hope to get two or three more; and when the e-tutor is working with drafts, no one else in the Center can get on to help students, do research, enter data, etc. So a second concern, though often overlooked, is that **e-tutoring takes machines, machine space, and machine time**. Again, this has to be budgeted for–and since university budgeting processes are anticipatory, it may mean that budgeting done this year may allow limited tutoring to start next year. It's not fair to ask tutors to do the e-tutoring at their own cost of connection time and materials; somehow that has to be reimbursed.

Finally there's the issue of **interface problems**. Eric's web-based drop box solved a lot of transmission problems that occurred with cutting and pasting, but we all know how e-messages can occasionally get lost in cyberspace, floating around aimlessly somewhere out in the Matrix like Keanu Reeves without a telephone. Administratively, there has to be a system for effectively monitoring not only the quality of the tutoring that takes place, but also the details of it: logging papers received and sent back, acknowledging receipt, confirming transmission, filing tutorial reports, etc. Many of these can be set up as part of the web form if they are properly designed, but someone has to remember to do this. Mies van der Rohe said that God is in the details; if we want to avoid angry charges that "The tutor's computer ate my paper," we have to allocate time, resources, and planning to making sure we can track and assess our e-tutoring efforts.

So while Eric's study has shown us, at least, that e-tutoring can be implemented in our current system by a trained and talented tutor and that students show as successful outcomes with

e-tutoring as with f2f tutoring, we have not yet committed ourselves to the e-tutorial enterprise. Already we have heard the plaint, "Well, I heard you tutored people by e-mail last year; why can't you do it now?" We are not willing to undertake this very complex process without the resources and staff needed to do it well; we hope that we will be able to convince our administration in the very near future to allocate those resources so that we can carry forward with this work, which we are convinced has great value for our university and our mission.

Select Bibliography

Buswell, Eric. "The E-Mail Writing Conference and Winthrop University." MA Thesis, Winthrop University, July 2000.

Carlson, David A. and Eileen Apperson-Williams. "The Anxieties of Distance: Online Tutors Reflect." *Taking Flight with OWLS: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*. Eds. James A. Inman and Donna Sewell. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000. 129-50.

Castner, Joanna. "The Asynchronous, Online Writing Session: A Two Way Stab in the Dark?" *Taking Flight with OWLS: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*. Eds. James A. Inman and Donna Sewell. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000. 119-28.

Coogan, David. "E-Mail Tutoring: A New Way to Do New Work." *Computers and Composition* (1995): 171-82.

Crossland, Andrew. "Electronic Mail and the Writing Center." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. 22.8 (1998): 5-6.

Harris, Muriel and Michael Pemberton. "Online Writing Labs (OWLS): A Taxonomy of Options and Issues." *Computers and Composition* 12 (1995): 145-60.

Hobson, Eric. Ed. *Wiring the Writing Center*. Logan, UT: Utah UP, 1998.

Inman, James A. and Donna Sewell. Eds. *Taking Flight With OWLS: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000.

Jennings, Edward M. "Paperless Writing: Boundary Conditions and Their Implications." *Writing at Century's End: Essays on Computer-Assisted Composition*. Ed. Lisa Gerrard. NY: Random House, 1987. 11-20.

Monroe, Barbara. "The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference." *Wiring the Writing Center*. Ed. Eric Hobson. Logan, UT: Utah UP, 1998. 3-24.

Montecino, Virginia and Mary Lou Crouch. "Cyberstress: Asynchronous Anxiety or Worried in Cyberspace–I Wonder if My Teacher Got My Email?" *Teaching in the Community Colleges (Online) Journal*. 3. Spring 1997. University of Hawaii. 9 Sep. 1999. <http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/pub/tcc-j/tccj-97.pre4.htm>.

Nelson, Jane and Cynthia A. Wambeam. "Moving Computers into the Writing Center: The Path to Least Resistance." *Computers and Composition* 12 (1995): 135-44.

Spooner, Micheal and Kathleen Yancey. "Postings on a Genre of E-Mail." *College Composition and Communication* 47 (1996): 252-78.